Colchester Public Schools

127 Norwich Avenue, Suite 202
Colchester, CT 06415

Daniel P. Sullivan, III
Superintendent of Schools

Phone (860) 537-7208
dsullivan@colchesterct.org

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Dear Students, Staff and Families:

This week I had the privilege of attending the PTO meeting at Jack Jackter and the Board of Directors meeting at Castle. At both meetings, I received quite a few questions about the budget, the budget process and statements of concern. I am choosing to write to you today, because I imagine that the folks at those meetings aren't the only ones with these questions and concerns.

Why is the Board and Central Office threatening to cut music and full day Kindergarten?

We haven't threatened to cut either program in the budget process. The only positions proposed for elimination in the budget process were a 1.0 PE position at WJ, 1.0 World Language and 1.0 Business at Bacon Academy. Those recommendations were included in the Superintendent's budget presented on February 7, 2023.

If that's the case, why is the district using scare tactics by talking about program reductions to try to pass the budget?

That certainly isn't my intention as Superintendent or that of the Board of Education. As indicated in the article I wrote for the Rivereast and shared with families last week, at the Board of Finance Public Hearing on Tuesday, March 7, 2023, I was asked what it would look like if the district only received a 5% increase. If there were a 5% increase to the budget, rather than the proposed 9.83% increase, it would result in reductions to the amount of approximately $2 million. I was responding to the question to illustrate a series of possible reductions that would only bring us down to a 6.4% increase.

Why did you choose Band and Kindergarten over others?

If we had to reduce the budget by over 4%, we would need to eliminate positions as 61% of our budget is staff. This in turn would require us to identify programs that we are not required to offer. Without question, we see the value in all day kindergarten but it is not a state requirement. We also take pride in the strength of the music program, but we could reduce the band positions as we also offer general music.

To be clear, the list was more extensive than just band and kindergarten as it also included maximizing contractual class size limits in grades 1-5, and had certified reductions at Bacon Academy just to name a few.

Does that mean these programs are in jeopardy?

At this point in time, we haven't received any recommendations from the Board of Finance relative to the budget number they plan to forward to the town meeting and ultimately to referendum.

Why is the district putting a spotlight on special education?

Special education is but one of a few lines in the proposed budget that have increased since last year for which the District is obligated to pay (see below for a discussion of other lines that have been increased over last year). The Board of Education and district leadership recognize that it is our moral responsibility and legal obligation to support the unique learning needs of our special education students. We have highlighted the costs associated with meeting their needs because the Board of Finance has asked for a detailed explanation in writing.

Given that request, can you please explain what's going on in special education?

First and foremost, Special Education is a legal obligation and is non-negotiable. Eligible students may begin receiving services as early as age 3 and continue until graduation or when they age-out at 22, as determined annually by the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) based on their individual needs and continued eligibility. The District is obligated to provide the special education and related services required to meet an individual student's needs.

Why does the Special Education line change so drastically?

Many factors such as:

- Who has aged-in/out?
- Who moved-in/out of the District?
- Who has been identified as in need of special education services?
- Whose programming needs have changed (LRE)?
- Who needs complex services that the District is unable to provide in-district?
- Who needs extended day/school year services?

Why did the district add a Special Education Supervisor?

This decision was made in response to the comprehensive independent review of the Special Education program conducted by *InCompliance* last year, which included feedback to provide additional support at the building level from staff with an expertise in Special Education.

Is it true that the salary line for special education teachers is down and the salaries of administrators have increased?

Yes. Our new Business Director discovered that the district could increase our medicaid reimbursement by shifting a school psychologist, an occupational therapist and a social worker currently being paid through grants back into the budget, and in turn we are paying those special education teachers via the grant.

The salary line for administrators has increased due to contractual obligations. They are scheduled to receive a 2.50% raise in July.

Are there new programs or positions in the budget?

Yes, the budget includes two new positions that were funded by grants. One kindergarten teacher and the Special Education Supervisor referenced above. The budget does also include the addition of 4 safety officers (not police) at a total cost of approximately $150,000.

Did we have other positions funded by grants?

Yes, the following five positions were removed from the budget a few years ago and were temporarily funded via stimulus grants. They are now returning to the budget. These are not new positions.

1.0 Kindergarten Teacher	1.0 Special Education	
1.0 Preschool Teacher	0.6 Reading Specialist	0.5 Child Development Associate

How did we wind up in a position that we need such a large amount of money to maintain current programs and services?

While this budget is largely a “status quo” budget, the increase is driven by:

- 3.70% increase in salaries due to contractual obligations
- 1.26 % increase in insurance obligations
- 1.55% increase in special education services
- 2.54% increase in out of district tuition (special education)

The remaining 2.26% is from small increases across all other line items.

If the community supports this increase, should we expect an 8% or 9% request again next year?

No. According to the projection run by our Business Director, if current expenditures remain stable and we don't add new programs or positions, we would need a 3% increase to maintain the status quo in Fiscal Year 24-25. There are only 2.0 Registered Behavioral Therapist positions that we anticipate shifting from grants to the budget in Fiscal year 24-25.

Where can I find more information on the budget?

Please visit https://www.colchesterct.org/board_of_education/education_budget

Final Thoughts

It is my goal to establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust with staff, students and families. It is my hope that letters such as this, coupled with the information online and my attendance at PTO meetings, etc. will help achieve that goal. Please know that I am grateful for the questions from all members of our school community, and for your participation in the budget process.

Please feel free to email me at DSullivan@colchesterct.org or call my office at 860-537-7208.

You are also welcome to reach out to Assistant Superintendent Dr. Charles E. Hewes at CHewes@colchesterct.org and office number 860-537-7268.

Sincerely,

Daniel P. Sullivan, III
Superintendent of Schools